

# THE MULTICULTURAL WORKFORCE: THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS AS GATEKEEPERS

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## ABSTRACT

Most firms in Auckland are characterised by a structure which has a broad, largely Polynesian base with a smaller totally white executive peak. Employers, as the principal gatekeepers controlling access to the resource of employment, have contributed to this imbalance by limiting the job opportunities available to the Pacific Islander. In relation to this, management needs to reassess its attitudes and practices, and the new Human Rights Commission Act may be a suitable incentive.

## INTRODUCTION

The Human Rights Commission Act which was enacted on the 21 November 1977 has major implications for employers when it eventually comes into force. It identifies certain types of discrimination as being illegal and provides a procedure whereby these practices may be altered. In particular, it extends the definition of racial discrimination to areas not covered by the Race Relations Act 1971. Given the importance of the Polynesian<sup>1</sup> workforce to firms in areas like South Auckland and Lower Hutt, it is useful to examine the current practices of employers to see whether they contravene the new Act. The present study focusses on the attitudes and behaviour of Auckland employers towards their Pacific Islander workforce.<sup>1</sup>

A number of studies<sup>2</sup> have shown that there are inequalities, as measured by traditional socio-economic indicators, between the Pakeha and Polynesian populations of New Zealand. The Polynesian groups can be described as occupying a position of relative deprivation in comparison with the European majority group, due in no small part to the fact that their access to certain resources and services is limited and con-

trolled by factors external to the group. Even the traditional channels of redistribution in New Zealand, such as the welfare state and trade union bargaining, have only been of limited benefit to the Polynesian. In this sense, he can be described as occupying a position of underprivilege.

This position of underprivilege is common to all migrants who are relatively poor and lack the necessary economic and social abilities deemed essential in an industrialised society. The Maori migrant from a rural area and the Pacific Island migrants share these characteristics with other migrants. But once established in New Zealand, white immigrant groups, such as the Irish or Dutch, have achieved integration in areas like employment fairly rapidly. They are to be found in all echelons of the employment hierarchy, including skilled and professional jobs and positions of authority. In contrast, the Polynesian migrant has tended to remain at the bottom of the structure in the semi- and unskilled jobs. The question arises as to what extent the employers, as a gatekeeper group, are responsible for this situation?

Gatekeepers are those individuals who in some way control the distribution of goods and services, and particularly the

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1—Pacific Islander refers to Polynesians from the Pacific Islands, including Samoans, Cook Island Maori, Tongans, Niueans and Tokelauans. The term Polynesian refers to these groups plus the New Zealand Maori.

2—C. Macpherson "Polynesians in New Zealand: An Emerging Eth-Class?" in D. Pitt (ed). *Social Class in New Zealand* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1977).

allocation of resources such as employment. The migrant is confronted by a number of gatekeeper groups when seeking a job, and each of these groups has the power to affect his employment opportunities. The applicant will initially be confronted by the primary gatekeeper, the employment officer or a member of an employment agency. Either of these groups can be selective about the type of job they offer to the Pacific Islander, if in fact they offer a job at all. Once employed, the individual is faced with a myriad of secondary gatekeepers, ranging from the leading hand or shopfloor supervisor to middle and upper management. All these people are able to affect, in varying degrees and ways, the employment possibilities of the migrant.

If these various gatekeeper groups hold negative beliefs and attitudes about the migrant group with whom they are dealing, and discriminate in accordance with these beliefs and attitudes, then the opportunities for integration by the migrant are greatly reduced. In the New Zealand context, this would explain why the Polynesian has failed to disperse through the employment hierarchy. It also suggests that an essential difference between the treatment of migrant groups is the presence of racial features. A cycle or sequence of intergroup relations is recognisable.

The cycle begins with a migrant who is unskilled or semiskilled being placed in employment that suits his qualifications and for which there is often no local supply of labour. In fulfilling this role, the migrant is clearly not marginal to the economy but is performing "... an important and indispensable function in the productive process."<sup>3</sup> White migrant groups in New Zealand occupy this position for a transition period before they are able to acquire the appropriate skills or necessary capital to move up the hierarchy. But for coloured migrants in a similar position, the channels of advancement are generally closed. This is primarily because racial features constitute a highly visible means on which to hang social images and beliefs. With time, the lack of occupational mobility by the Polynesian means that he becomes associated by the employment gatekeeper with

certain industries and low status jobs. Images based on this distribution come to be the:

"... predominant mode of identifying individuals in connection with socio-economic relationships, producing a factor which then tends to be detrimental to the mobility chances of minorities."<sup>4</sup>

In this way, racial ascription by employers takes the place of achievement by the employee. The group is allocated a specific role by the gatekeeper, and this invokes the notion of unsuitability for other roles. While this restriction of occupational mobility and ascriptive role allocation are not peculiar to race relations situations,<sup>5</sup> the visibility of racial features provides an easy means of identification for categorisation and ascription. It is the argument of this paper that this description applies to the employment situation in New Zealand and is one of the factors that has produced the inequality between Polynesian and Pakeha. To support this contention, the research examined the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of a group of employers towards their Pacific Islander employees.

#### METHODOLOGY

Fifty-one Auckland firms who were known to employ Polynesians were approached to see if their management would agree to being interviewed. In the end, 49 individuals representing 44 firms were interviewed. Most of the respondents were personnel managers although in the smaller companies, managers and firms' secretaries who were responsible for personnel were also included in the survey. Of the 44 firms, 7 were classified as manufacturing, and the rest as service companies including two retail and five wholesale firms, and 10 in a category of 'other.' This latter category consisted primarily of public services such as hospitals and transport. In terms of size, 22 companies had less than 100 employees, 10 had between 100 and 800, and 12 had over 800 employees. The interviews were based on an open-ended interviewing schedule and were recorded on tape.

The other method used was a test of job opportunities based on an earlier study by Jowell and Prescott-Clarke.<sup>6</sup> It involved sending matched written applications to

3—A. Godula and B. Castles "Immigrant Workers and the Class Structure," *Race*, v. 12, No. 2 (1971) p. 311.  
4—E. Kreuz "Factors of Social Mobility in British Minority Groups," *British Journal of Sociology*, v. 23 (1972) p. 282.

5—H. Dickie-Clark "Some Issues in the Sociology of Race Relations," *Race*, v. 15, No. 2 (1973) p. 242.  
6—R. Jowell and P. Prescott-Clarke "Racial Discrimination and White Collar Workers in Britain," *Race*, v. 11, No. 4 (1970).

firms advertising white collar jobs in the Auckland newspapers. The two applicants were matched in terms of five variables and only differed on country of primary and secondary schooling, and the ethnic group of the applicant. The test was designed to see if the employer differentiated between ethnic groups in the granting of job interviews to candidates. Seventy-five jobs were applied for in all, and for 25 of these, a Niuean (representing Pacific Islander groups) and a New Zealand born European applied with equal qualifications; another 25 saw the Niuean applying with higher qualifications (either in terms of experience or academic qualifications) than the European; and as a control group the final 25 vacancies were applied for by a Maori and an European with equal qualifications.

#### GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS PACIFIC ISLANDER MIGRANTS

The interviewing began at a general level in an attempt to assess the employer's attitude towards the employment of Pacific Islanders. It was discovered that there was a commonly held view that the Pacific Islanders were a necessary although unwelcome part of the labour force. Nearly two thirds (62%) of the respondents stated that the employment of Pacific Islanders was one of the less attractive alternatives in the labour market. However, they argued, given a situation of full employment, then it was essential that they employ Pacific Island labour. Three of those interviewed stated that although they were understaffed, they preferred to remain that way rather than increase the proportion of Pacific Islanders employed in their companies. They cited difficulties associated with training, language and client relationships as the main reasons for this policy. It is significant that of the 31 respondents in this category, 19 were in firms of less than 100 employees. In contrast, the larger companies were much happier about employing Pacific Islanders. They particularly commented on the fact that the Pacific Islander was a better employee than the Pakehas who were available for the same jobs.

"The type of New Zealander who is likely to walk in off the street and stay here is generally a low calibre guy

... the sort of guy who is fairly itinerant, his absenteeism is bad, his work is poor. The Islander, on the other hand, is generally very good. He is a much better worker . . ."

But even the majority of these respondents admitted that in the event of having to dispense with labour, the Pacific Islander would be the first to go. Clearly, the nature of the jobs in which they are located are those most affected by economic fluctuations.

On the question of the desirability of the Pacific Islander as an employee, there were two discernable groups. The larger companies were, on the whole, very willing to employ Pacific Islanders whereas the smaller firms showed more reluctance and often admitted that if there was an alternative source of labour, then they would hire fewer Pacific Islanders.

#### BELIEFS ABOUT THE PACIFIC ISLANDER

The employer's beliefs and knowledge of the Pacific Islander are examined in this section. The characteristics attributed to the Pacific Islander by the employer were classified into two categories: personal and occupational.<sup>7</sup> Occupational characteristics refer to the effectiveness (as seen by the employer) of the employees in their jobs, while personal characteristics relate to personality, character or physical qualities which the respondent may find attractive or unattractive.

##### (a) Personal

The most dominant comment in this category was the claim that the Pacific Islander continued to practise his traditional lifestyle in New Zealand, and this was seen as detrimental to both the employer and the community. Thirty-one (62%) of those interviewed voiced this belief, and the majority stressed that the New Zealand Government must ensure that every Pacific Islander entering New Zealand is told that they are expected to adopt the local lifestyle. To continue a traditional lifestyle that was culturally different was seen by many of the employers as an abuse of the privileges granted to a migrant.

Related to this was the alleged problem of language. Nearly everyone interviewed saw language as a serious problem in

relation to Pacific Islanders, and the following statement is representative of the general feeling:

"If only they (Pacific Islanders) spoke better English, we would have few problems. If they are going to be accepted here, then they must be able to speak better English than they do now."

Other than these two characteristics, there was little else that attracted general comment. The only other attributes to receive mention were the poor hygiene of the Pacific Islander, which was noted by 24 per cent of the respondents, and a smaller number (12%) viewed him as deceitful. Most of the comments were in a negative vein, and this was also true for the occupational characteristics mentioned by the employers.

#### (b) Occupational

The employers saw the lack of any appreciation of quality as one of the principal difficulties arising from the employment of Pacific Islanders. Fifty-five per cent of the respondents referred to this, and a further ten per cent agreed with this view when it was put to them by the interviewer. As one employer put it:

"Our major problem is not to turn the machines faster but to turn out quality work."

This belief was seen as justification for excluding Pacific Islanders from those jobs that require any understanding of quality production, and it was freely admitted by a number of employers that they felt that Pacific Islanders were best suited to jobs which required little skill.

The other major occupational characteristic attributed to the Pacific Islander was their tendency to introduce conflict into the work situation. Fifty-three per cent of the respondents regarded the Pacific Islander as responsible for the antagonism between both Pacific Islander and Pakeha, and Pacific Islander and Maori. It was felt that the reluctance of the Pacific Islander to use English and to mix with other ethnic groups produced ill-feeling. Also, the fact that particular Pacific Islander groups tended to muscle into certain departments to the exclusion of other groups was seen as detrimental to cordial work relations. One respondent commented:

"In the lunchroom, it is noticeable how quick the minority (the Pakeha)

moved out because they were overwhelmed with too many Polynesians (Pacific Islanders). They talk in their own language and sit together."

There were, however, some positive characteristics mentioned. Five (10%) of the sample observed that they found the Pacific Islander to be punctual. The Maori was described as a 'holiday taker' in comparison with the Pacific Islanders' 'business-like' manner, and the Tongans were singled out as having a 100 per cent attendance record. But generally, comments focused on the problems presented by the Pacific Islander employee.

#### KNOWLEDGE OF PACIFIC ISLANDER GROUPS

The attitudes and beliefs described above tend in the main to dwell on negative features and were often stereotypical in form. This can be related to the fact that actual knowledge of Pacific Islanders amongst the respondents was often minimal. Of the sixty-two per cent who did speak in predominantly negative terms about the Pacific Islander, fifty-three per cent admitted that their knowledge about the different migrant groups was limited. When asked to differentiate between the ethnic groups from the Pacific Islands, ten per cent declined to say anything because they were simply not aware of the differences. In these cases, it is hardly surprising that opinions were expressed in the form of stereotypes. Other respondents were confused (in varying degrees) when talking about the groups in question. For instance, Rarotongans and Cook Islanders were spoken of as though they were separate groups; some had not heard of Niueans; others confused Melanesian and Polynesian groups; and many were not sure on technicalities such as which Pacific Islanders were New Zealand citizens.

Significantly, nearly all of those who were vague or had little understanding of the various Pacific Island groups were found in the smaller (less than 100 employees) firms. Of the fifty-three per cent of the respondents whose knowledge of Pacific Islanders was judged to be non-existent or minimal, seventeen were from organisations of less than 100 employees, and six from firms of less than 800.

In comparison with the above group, there was another smaller group who were able to identify and discuss the cultural

and social differences between the Pacific Islander groups. The respondents who demonstrated this awareness were nearly all from the larger companies. These firms clearly had the resources and inclination to tackle the problems associated with the employment of Pacific Islanders. This was apparent in the presence of personnel who were qualified in some way to deal with a multi-cultural workforce, and in the policies adopted by the companies, such as the use of multilingual notices or the recognition of cultural practices when agreeing to time off from work. A number of these respondents deplored the lack of awareness amongst some of their fellow employers of the problems faced by Pacific Islanders, and they argued that management practices must be more in keeping with the multicultural nature of the workforce. However, even with this group's understanding, there remains the question as to whether their actions reflect their attitudes.

#### DISCRIMINATION

Positive attitudes are meaningless in the face of behaviour which works to the disadvantage of the migrant. It therefore is important to examine the degree to which opportunities are available to the migrant. An initial indicator is the degree to which Pacific Islanders are to be found at all levels of the company. Of the firms approached in this research, only eight of the forty-four had Pacific Islanders in supervisory positions or white collar jobs. At the time of the survey, there were no Pacific Islanders in middle or senior management positions. The reasons given for this situation were varied. One reason offered was that 'other people would object,' the 'other people' being clients, customers and fellow workers. Some of the companies thought that it was too risky to put Pacific Islanders in areas where they had contact with the public:

"We deliberately do not employ Islanders in certain departments because we suspect public reaction would not be too favourable."

Other companies stated that Pacific Islanders in authority or management positions were not part of the company 'image' or to promote them would produce conflict with fellow workers who were Pakeha or Maori. Forty per cent of the respondents

noted a reluctance by employers to put a Pacific Islander in charge of Maori or Pakeha workers. It was mentioned above that some employers had said that there was antagonism between these groups, and they felt that this would be 'brought to a head' if a Pacific Islander was placed in a position of authority.

A further reason offered in explanation of why Pacific Islanders were not given supervisory roles was that they were seen as incapable of handling divergent responsibilities. As one respondent stated:

"In supervisory roles, the Polynesian becomes a split personality. He wants to be accepted by the group much more so than a European in a similar position. On the other hand, he must be loyal to management. And this is where they fail. The Polynesian reverts to his group as a normal worker because he can't handle split loyalties."

Even those large companies that had expressed sympathy for the situation faced by the Pacific Islander had to admit that there were few migrants in supervisory or white collar positions. Most attributed this to the fact that there were no suitably qualified Pacific Islanders, or that they did not apply when jobs were advertised.

There was, however, a small group of companies who had made it a policy to see that Pacific Islanders received special consideration in terms of training and promotion. Six of the forty-four companies acted in this way, and the following quotation is one example of this type of approach.

"Our policy has been to keep a ratio of one Polynesian worker to every three Europeans. We haven't been so successful in the office staff but with our tradesmen we have kept this quota, and in our apprentices, we've been successful in a ratio of one to five."

There are opportunities available, at least in these firms, and this augurs well for the future of some Pacific Islanders, but for the majority of channels for vertical mobility in the workplace appear limited. The employers are reluctant to place the Pacific Islander in a number of positions, and this conclusion is supported by the following exercise designed to test the opportunities for Pacific Islanders in white collar employment.

### JOB TEST

The test involved sending matched applications for a particular job from applicants of different groups. The responses indicated the willingness of employers to treat candidates from various ethnic groups in a similar fashion. Two aspects of this test should be noted. Firstly, there is an important difference between granting an interview and actually employing a person. This test was concerned only with the former. Secondly, it was necessary to invent suitably qualified applicants, and in the case of the Maori and Pacific Islander, these applicants may have been atypical of the migrant group and thus, a possible source of bias.

The results of the test are given in Tables 1 to 4. The degree of negative discrimination (that is, one applicant is granted an interview while the other is not) against the Niuean when both applicants had the same qualifications and experience amounted to nearly one-third (32%) of the applications in Table 1. However, in Table 2 where the Niuean had higher qualifications than his European co-applicant, the Niuean was still discriminated against in 24 per cent of the applications. For purposes of a comparison, a Maori applicant was paired with a Pakeha (Table 3), and here the Maori met negative discrimination in 20 per cent of his applications. The significant point here is that the Maori suffered less discrimination than the Niuean, even when the latter had better qualifications than his Pakeha counterpart. It was noted above that the employer commented on Maori absenteeism, and yet even in the light of such criticisms, it appears that the Maori is preferable to the Pacific Islander as an employee for white collar jobs.

### RESULTS OF THE MATCHED APPLICATIONS

TABLE 1  
Same Qualifications - Niuean/Pakeha

	No.	%
Both applicants invited for an interview	12	48
Both refused interviews	3	12
Both received no reply	2	8
(i) No discrimination	17	68
Pak. interview, Niuean no reply	2	8
Pak. interview, Niuean refused	6	24
(ii) Discrimination against migrant	8	32
Niuean interview, Pakeha refused	0	0

(iii) Discrimination in favour of migrant	0	0
TOTAL	25	100

TABLE 2  
Higher Qualifications - Niuean/Pakeha

Both applicants invited for an interview	10	40
Both refused	5	20
Both received no reply	1	4
(i) No discrimination	16	64
Pak. interview, Niuean no reply	1	4
Pak. interview, Niuean refused	5	20
(ii) Discrimination against Niuean	6	24
Niuean interview, Pak. refused	3	12
Niuean interview, Pak. no reply	0	0
(iii) Discrimination in favour of migrant	3	12
TOTAL	25	100

TABLE 3  
Same Qualifications - Maori/Pakeha

Both applicants invited for an interview	13	52
Both refused	3	12
Both received no reply	1	4
(i) No discrimination	17	68
Pak. interview, Maori no reply	2	8
Pak. interview, Maori refused	3	12
(ii) Discrimination against Maori	5	20
Maori interview, Pak. refused	2	8
Maori interview, Pak. no reply	0	0
(iii) Discrimination in favour of Maori	2	8

This is apparent in Table 4 which summarizes all the test results. When qualifications were equal, the Niuean had a success rate of 48 per cent and the Pakeha 80 per cent, a difference of 32 per cent. Under similar conditions, the Maori had a success rate of 60 per cent to the Pakeha's 68 per cent, a difference of 8 per cent. When the Niuean was better qualified than the Pakeha, his success rate rose only minimally from 48 per cent to 52 per cent, and although in comparison, the Pakeha rate declined from 80 per cent to 64 per cent, he was still more successful in 12 per cent of the applications.

TABLE 4  
Percentage Successful in their Applications

	Niuean %	Pakeha %
Table 1	48	80
Table 2	52	64
	Maori %	Pakeha %
Table 3	60	68

The results support the argument that white collar job opportunities open to the Niuean in particular, and the Pacific Islander in general, are limited in comparison to both Pakeha and Maori. There is, of course, the possibility that additional discrimination may be experienced in the interview situation further cutting the avenues open to the Pacific Islander.

### CONCLUSIONS

Employers pay a central role in the progression of a migrant group from a position of underprivilege to a group which is integrated into the social system of the host society. From the evidence presented here, it is clear that some employers are inhibiting the successful adaptation of Pacific Islanders to the New Zealand situation. For instance, the employers tended to dwell on the perceived negative characteristics of the migrant and they commented on the Pacific Islanders inability to grasp notions of quality, their alleged reluctance to mix in the work situation, hygiene problems and a lack of communication skills in English. At the same time, many of the respondents were unaware of the specific cultural backgrounds of Pacific Islander groups and utilized a blanket category of 'Islander,' although a distinction was made between Maori and non-Maori Polynesian. This use of a blanket term has received comment in other studies.<sup>8</sup> The end result of the lack of detailed knowledge, and the attitudinal and belief systems of the employer, is that the Pacific Islander is seen as suitable to a particular role in the employment sphere, and action is taken on this basis. This is apparent in the section on discrimination and the job tests where the gatekeepers were reluctant to offer access to roles incongruent with the ascribed role.

Undoubtedly this situation is changing as management realises that a number of their policies and practices are not suitable for a multi-cultural workforce. Some firms are beginning to sensitize their employees, both those in authority and on the shop floor, to the difficulties faced by the migrant and to the nuances of their cultural traditions, as well as providing better facilities for the migrant. They have been helped by a number of outside agencies. The Department of

Maori Affairs and the technical institutes, to name two organisations, have provided a variety of courses that help the migrant to adjust to his new surroundings. And others, such as the Institute of Management and the Vocational Training Council, have been prominent in promoting discussion or research on the Polynesian in the workforce. But there is still a lot to be done, particularly by the employers themselves.

For instance, the present research shows that many employers will need to reassess their approach and practices in areas such as recruitment, training and promotion so that they are better able to utilize the Pacific Islander worker, and because it appears that, at present, they contravene the new Human Rights Commission Act. The Act identifies three types of discrimination. 'Direct discrimination' refers to the specific denial or restriction of access to benefits. 'Indirect discrimination' is described as 'discrimination by subterfuge' (Section 27) and covers action which has the effect of giving preferential treatment although it does not appear to contravene the Act. And finally, Section 28 and 29 allow for and encourage positive discrimination which refers to any programme or form of assistance which seeks to achieve equality between various groups. Obviously many of the reasons given above by employers for not hiring Pacific Islanders in certain positions will be unacceptable under the provisions of the Act. Even practices which are seemingly based on objective criteria but which have the effect of being discriminatory, will fall within the Act's sphere, especially as the onus is on the employer to prove that he has taken reasonable steps to prevent discrimination, and it is not a defence to argue that the discrimination was unintentional. What, then, are the reasonable steps available to the employer?

Firstly, and most importantly, employers must ensure that an individual's race or ethnic origin are irrelevant in terms of job choice or achievement. All employees must be aware of company policy on this point because the Act (Section 33) specifically states that the employer is liable even when

8—T. D. Graves and N. B. Graves "As Others See Us: New Zealanders Images of Themselves and of Immigrant Groups" Paper to the Dunedin Branch, Institute of International Affairs, March 1974; and D. C. Pitt and C. Macpherson "Voluntary Separation and Ethnic Participation — Samoan Migrants in New Zealand, Nutfield Foundation Ethnic Relations Project, Preliminary Report, No. 1, November, 1971.

the discriminatory act is committed by an employee without the employer's knowledge or approval. Even if racial considerations are minimized, however, it is clear that some groups are still unfairly treated because they are restricted or hampered by their ethnic background and upbringing, and this may require the employer to accept responsibility to remedy these handicaps. For example, language training should be an essential part of job training for those who are deficient in this area. After all, such a deficiency is an artificial restraint on job mobility because it can be eliminated or minimized. And the effort required by the company can just as easily be justified in terms of economic self-interest as for ethical or legal reasons. Another major strategy must be an attempt to raise the consciousness of both management and worker of the cultural values and behaviour of the appropriate ethnic groups in order to negate the stereotypes and prejudice which are often the basis for discriminatory acts. There is clearly a lot of ignorance about Pacific Islander traditions, and ways

of coping with racial and ethnic problems in the factory. There is room here for management training and there are agencies, some of which are mentioned above, which are in existence to help in this field. There are a number of other strategies that could also be used by companies. These might include written job specifications and the wider publicizing of vacancies; the recording of ethnic origin so that it is possible to monitor the work performance and relative position of members of each ethnic group as this information is an essential pre-requisite for the introduction of equal opportunities; and the recognition of different cultural behavioural patterns in the organisation of the firm so that (to cite one example) it becomes possible to anticipate and plan for absences arising from ethnic group activity. And fundamentally, there must be an acceptance by everyone of multiculturalism as such, in place of the expectation that all groups must conform to a monocultural system either in the workplace or in society as a whole. ©